

Pearl Harbor survivors recall fateful day

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Today marks the anniversary of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, causing the U.S. entry into World War II.

To many Americans, Dec. 7, 1941, tends to be reduced to a date in history, something that you needed to know on a test in a history class at school. To Cliff Reynolds and Hugh Wright, both of Independence, Dec. 7, 1941, is more than just a date in history. Exactly 59 years ago today, both men were called upon to defend their country as they had their first encounter with death as sailors in U.S. Navy. Reynolds and Wright are Pearl Harbor survivors.

Reynolds was a first-class seaman on the USS Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor, just off the coast of Southern Hawaii. Although he knew Wright before the two had enlisted into the navy, Reynolds was unaware that Wright was a machinist on the USS Maryland.

It seemed like a typical Sunday, even if one in the U.S. Navy. Reynolds was on deck of his ship, waiting to go to town. It was his turn on "liberty," and he and some members of his crew, were getting ready to spend the day away from the battleship — it was supposed to be a day of leisure and fun.

Wright was on stand-by-duty aboard the USS Maryland. He had to be ready in case he was needed that day. It seemed just like another Sunday. Instead the day soon became known to all Americans as that "day of infamy."

Both men could see prior warning or sign that Pearl Harbor was about to be attacked, just before 7:55 a.m. All seemed calm.

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— Cliff Reynolds
Pearl Harbor survivor

ships were stationed along the harbor," said Wright. "I then saw some black specks. I thought some of our planes were on maneuvers. I then heard the sirens go off. That's when it all started. It might have been the second or third plane that flew by, but I could see big red spots on the wings. I said to a seaman that was next to me, 'By gosh, those planes are Japan's!'"

Reynolds could see the planes, too, as he stood on the deck of the Oklahoma. He believes that it was a big squadron of about 20 bombers.

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Before both men were able to escape from harm's way, Wright was able to see the enemy up close as a Japanese pilot lowered the plane close to the battleships that he was about to attack.

"As one of the Japanese gunners flew by, I could see him wave his hand at us, as he dropped his bombs," recalled Wright. "But he never lived to brag about it. He was shot down by an apprentice seaman, somebody who just got out of basic training."

Wright explained that the USS Maryland was hit by two torpedoes. He had been told that another 15-20 torpedoes just missed the ship, hitting the water instead. Although the ship did not sink, Wright stated that 190

people out of about 1,800 people lost their lives from the attack. Wright has also been told that on top side of the ship, 70 percent of the seamen had their ear drums broken from the blast of the bombs and torpedoes.

The Oklahoma was hit even worse. The ship was capsized from Japanese torpedoes. Reynolds explains that there was no time to think. He could only react. He soon found himself in the water, which was filled with oil as result of the explosions. Reynolds swam around the stern of the ship and headed toward the nearby air station that was about 200 feet from where the ship was located.

As Reynolds swam up on the bank, he found himself covered with oil. He then headed toward the hangar, a place where U.S. planes were worked on, to get himself clean. Now that he was on the air base, he was safe as he could be on that day.

Some members of Reynolds's crew were not as fortunate. The Oklahoma lost 429 out of about 864 people who were aboard the ship. Reynolds is rather stoic in discussing the loss of so many men, some who he knew quite well as seamates aboard the ship. Their death is something that he would rather not dwell upon, just as he refused to dwell upon it when he first learned about the death of some of his fellow crew members.

"You can't react to it," said Reynolds, in explaining how he responded to the news of the dead of his fellow crew members. "It numbs you, for there is nothing that can do. You can't let it bother you though, if you did, you would go crazy."

While Reynolds was fleeing from the Oklahoma, Wright was actually going to the capsized ship. He was part of a rescue team that was sent to the Oklahoma as result of some men being trapped inside the ship once it turned over on its side. Because of the efforts of men like Wright, some members of the Oklahoma that were trapped and believed to be dead were saved when a hole was cut toward the bottom of the ship, thus rescuing members of the ship.

Like Reynolds, Wright also lost friends from the attack. He, too, faced the news with courage, refusing to succumb to the day's tragedy. However, even today, he speaks poetically in recalling the loss of some of his fellow crew members.

"For several days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the sun didn't shine. It was dark and cloudy," Wright said in reflecting back to that tragic day.

Just as the survivors of Pearl Harbor had to cope with the death of their friends and crew members, the families of those survivors also had to cope with the uncertainty of a loved one's life. Reynolds explained that the military was very efficient in contacting the families of the deceased during the war. However, survivors' families often had to wait a while until they received any notification of the safety of their loved ones.

"It took two weeks before my mom received my letter telling her

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